

Here is my story:

My husband Mike and I had decided we wanted to travel first and have our children later. We backpacked, hiked, and worked in South America, the Caribbean, USA, Europe and Greece for 18 months.

Chas, our first child, was born when we came home after our travels, when I was 30 and Mike 32.

The others followed quickly! Guy 1.5 years later and Philli 2 years later again! For 10 years, and while the children were small, I worked part and flexi-time, helping him as the Practice Manager for his General Practice in Fish Hoek.

I have loved being very involved in my children's lives and spending as much time with them as possible.

Running an informal play school for them and their friends, teaching co-ordination skills at Play School, having a hiking club, being on the Parents Contact Committee, doing arts and crafts and playing sport with them.

We all scuba dive, play squash, cycle, and ski together - both on water and on snow!

Mike and I decided we wanted to spend as much time with our children as possible and so opted not to send them to Boarding School. We drove them to and from School each day and made them each drive for a whole year, every day before they got their License.

We also tried to take leave every holiday, and go to Coastal shacks, or camping, and spent as much time with them and with our large friendship base and extended family, as was possible. Sometimes there may be 30 adults and children holidaying together!

The 11 nephews and nieces are all as close as siblings.

I am a Psychiatric Social Worker, and went back to work part time and specialized in Alcohol and Drug Counseling and Education, which I really love.

Chas was a brilliant lead guitarist, and was in a Band called "Plush." "Plush" had won the National "Battle of the Bands" in 2002, beating 500 bands nationwide including "Freshly Ground."

Once most of the cousins were at University in Cape Town, the "Plush" gigs were where they met and socialized, and were central to a lot of the family's get-togethers.

On a nationwide tour in September 2005 to launch the release of their new CD, Chas, then 23 year old, who had just played at an alcohol free gig and was a sober pedestrian, was killed by a driver who had been drinking, and was driving home from an Office party.

When Chas was killed our whole family was devastated. His death was like the death of child for the adults, and a sibling for the cousins, and many of them had to be treated for depression as well as our immediate family.

I was incensed. Chas was my first born, and we had a special bond. I had suffered a miscarriage before him, and his pregnancy was very unstable for many months. In his last few years I had a great need to be with him. It was as if I knew he was going to die.

Luckily I was self employed, and worked part time doing the Alcohol and Drug Education and Counselling in the Schools, so my time was very flexible.

Mike was also wonderful in that he went along with my deep gut feelings that I needed to see Chas as much as possible, and allowed me to travel to Cape Town from Pietermaritzburg where we live, as often as I wanted. In the last few years I went down about 5/6 times a year to be with him and to follow his musical career, to attend big Concerts, or recordings or special occasions. Philli had also gone down to University there, so I had double excuses to be there!

I attended many gigs with her and the cousins, and "friends", as their fans were called.

We would all go out in large groups, and have extended meals and cocktails, or cappuccinos and talk and talk. About his life, and loves, and music, and plans, and songs.

When he was killed, a part of me died as well. My connection with his Band, the other Bands who I had got to know, and young fans were cut off. Whenever I hear music now it causes me pain and is a constant reminder of him, and what could have been. When a child is killed, part of your future is killed too. No daughter-in-law to be, no wedding, no grandchildren. No future memories with them.

Chas was an awesome child. Gentle, kind, talented, lovable and always smiling. You never heard him say anything bad about anyone. He mentored and encouraged other young musicians, and always had time to listen to their aspirations and to offer them musical advice. I loved him unconditionally and very deeply.

He was living his dream - and we as a family were sponsoring and supporting him in every way possible. We were very proud of him, and loved his music.

He worked so hard at his talent. From the age of 11 he would spend all his spare time practicing his guitar. Practicing and practicing and recording – and making up new songs and music.

Apart from being devastated and very depressed, I was also furious! How could someone take drinking then driving so carelessly and casually? How dare his life have been taken so thoughtlessly! He had not been asked if he wanted to be killed. He was so loved and needed by all, and now he was just taken away- completely obliterated. This talented loved person was reduced to a pile of useless ash!

The terrible thing about his death was that very few people thought or think about Chas. They thought about how bad the person who killed him must feel. About their right for a trial, and the best Lawyer in town. Because there was this kind of feeling of :“Shame – it could have been me who had drunk that amount and driven, so I understand how she feels, and I feel sorry for her.” Due to poor data collection and investigations of the crash scene, she was found not guilty even though her blood alcohol level was 0.21g.

Chas and our family, as victims, had no rights in terms of the Laws of the country. I felt very deeply that this needed to change, and that I needed to fight for people to be protected from drink drivers on our roads and victims, to be given equal rights before our Courts.

I have fought and dealt with emotional battles all my life.

1st my legs being seriously injured in a car crash at age 8; then a cancer melanoma at age 28 that left me with a threat to my life and another big scar in my leg; the loss of a precious family home after the placement of 10,000 people of an Informal settlement on our boundary fence; another home burnt down, and then the early and untimely death of my mother, father and 2 brothers in different but tragic circumstances.

So I decided that the only thing that would help me cope with Chas’s death, and not make me go crazy, or kill myself, would be to fight back, in an appropriate way.

I had heard and promoted MADD’s (Mothers Against Drunk Driving’s) work whenever I taught, and decided to start a MADD branch in SA. MADD had over 300 branches in the US, 110 branches in Canada, and in a few other countries, and so was not keen to start another Branch in another country. They have been exceptionally kind by assisting us with Leaflets, pamphlets, advice and friendship whenever we call on them, or when we meet overseas.

So I founded South Africans Against Drunk Driving (SADD) in January 2006, barely 4 months after Chas’s death.

This was extremely difficult to start with. I was in total shock, consumed with grief, and every time I talked about Chas’s death or why I was starting SADD I was plunged back into our crash scene with Chas lying smashed in the road, knocked out of his shoes, with 3 rivers of blood from the back of his head running across the street and down the gutters,

while the paramedics worked on him, and we stood by. These bad nightmares, or flash backs, lasted about 3 years.

In addition I had great resistance from the Community and friends as they felt I should “forgive and forget” and felt I was out to get Chas’s killer, as opposed to seeing that I was trying to save other families from going through the same unnecessary pain and suffering that our family was going through. I have always felt I have a special talent in the Drug education scene, and that I could make a big difference to the lives of many people, and I had wanted for many years to branch out to reach the whole country about alcohol abuse, and drinking then driving.

I just knew after Chas’s death that I HAD to start SADD. I would not be able to live with my conscience if I did nothing when I possess the skills and expertise to deal with alcohol abuse and drunk driving issues in SA. In addition all my family was very supportive of the idea, and Mike sponsored the running costs for many years.

Being so determined, and also some what thick skinned, allowed me to forge ahead despite my friends or the Community who had been friendly with her and so were protecting her, or who were protecting their husbands as they also drive/drove drunk, and who all encouraged me to stop SADD. It has been very difficult to start an Organization such as SADD as I have also had little support from the authorities, or from sponsors as: “Everyone likes to drink then drive in SA!”

SADD meant I worked 10/15 hours a day, and didn’t have to think about my poor dead child. It meant when I could not sleep I had something constructive to do, as opposed to just weeping. Many of my ideas were put to paper at 3 am in the morning. It meant I had something to get out of bed to - a reason for living. It channeled my anger into something constructive. Otherwise I would not have been able to do anything or concentrate, or function at all.

I spent the 1st year flying around South Africa meeting with many of the relevant people in road safety, standardizing Units of Alcohol, creating awareness of drink driving issues, designing a website and designing posters and Programs.

That year-2006, in recognition of my efforts, I won South Africa’s premier recognition of road safety initiatives, the Evert van Niekerk C.A.R.S. “Road Safety Achievement of the Year Award”, beating OutSurance who had given R10 Million to the Department of Transport to buy new cars for Traffic Officers. This award made me very proud, yet also extremely sad, as it took my precious sons life to get me into this field.

W.H.O has also acknowledged SADD’s work, and has included SADD with 120 other International NGO’s who belong to the “Global Alliance of NGO’s Advocating for Road Safety and Road Victims.” We meet every 2 years and are taught Best Practice methods of road safety, and share ideas and support each other.

MADD taught me that my reactions of anger, non-acceptance of these deaths, not being able to forgive, and that I should fight for the victims as opposed to trying to understand and protect the drink driver, are all completely normal, and acceptable feelings. That to start an organization like SADD is desperately needed in our country where drink driving is seen as a right, and is nothing to be ashamed of. That I am not abnormal to be doing this work, but am rather a needed advocate for victims and their families.

I try and help as many other victims in SA as possible. Each time another person dies, part of me is traumatized, but it also empowers me to know I can support and help others, and that our combined energy can change the South African situation. We are unfortunately a tiny team as very few people are actively involved in our organization. All too often in South Africa people tend to think of these crashes as “Gods Will” and

that one should “Forgive and forget and move on”, and so do not actively work with us to help others.

My children Guy and Philli also became so much more precious, and their lives could not be taken for granted after Chas died. It was initially very hard to not expect the worst to happen. If they went out at night Mike and I were initially in a total panic until they got home.

Our trust in the roads, or others was totally gone, as we now knew that children DO die, and just because one child had died doesn't mean the others couldn't also be killed.

The children were very patient with me, and helped by always keeping in contact, and following the rules.

For Philli especially it affected her badly as she spent most of her early student days taking away friends car keys, not drinking at parties, and driving everyone home. She became too mature for her age. She is also now a qualified Addiction Social Worker.

Both children have been very involved in SADD and have helped teach me Computer skills, with designing Programs and posters, and generally working for me.

My children's safety from drink drivers was another reason why I started SADD, and my initial Projects were based in the University towns where they were.

In 2012 SADD received a “Prince Michael of Kent” International award for road safety for our project which has been running for many years in 10 Universities throughout South Africa.

My incredible love for my 2 children and husband gave me the will to live, and to not give in totally to grief.

The other people who have kept me going have been our Compassionate Friends Group, my Grief Counsellor, and my GP who said I did not have to feel quite so heartbroken, and suffer so much, and put me on an antidepressant. I attend Counselling when I need to, and when I have time. In the Group all of us mothers get together to support each other and to laugh and cry and talk about our children. To us they are not forgotten, they are just missing from this life. We need to talk about them without people feeling embarrassed.

On the occasions when I have felt I cannot cope or live any more, and have been suicidal, I have been able to phone the group leader who would give me a cup of tea, and let me weep and wail, and feel sorry for myself, and be told that I am reacting normally!

I have also coped because I am a woman who has been incredibly blessed with a loving, supportive extended family, many friends, a wonderful husband and sister and our 2 surviving fantastic children. I am truly blessed.